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TRAIL TO NOWHERE

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Photographs by Dave Buresh

Above the trail crew's bent and straining backs, the somber gray summit of 14,196-foot Mount Yale poked into swirling afternoon clouds that promised another thunderstorm.

Trying to beat the rain, they picked up the pace on this hillside eight miles west of Buena Vista, Colorado. They swung their pulaski hoes more quickly, carving two feet of level ground out of the slope. Others wielded mcleods, which look like fat rakes, to pull off the duff and ensure that the trail was topped by packed mineral soil. Two men with pry bars levered out a boulder and pulled another stump, while a woman trimmed trailside brush.

Most of them were white-collar office types, secretaries and engineers, unaccustomed to this type of work. Here they were, sprouting calluses and learning about limiment and living without running water. This was how they spent a week of summer vacation — building the Colorado Trail.

The only snag that day was "Bee Tree," fifty feet of decayed spruce right where the trail was supposed to go. Celia Nobles, one of the co-leaders, poked it with her pulaski; then she jumped and took off at a dead run, trying to escape a buzzing cloud of bees. Only a couple stung her. After her short conference with Colleen Jones, the other co-leader, two bends not in the plan were added to the trail. The bees got to keep their home.

If trail segments had Golden Spike ceremonies, they'd have had one that Thursday afternoon. Some of the dozen or so volunteers had started the week at Middle Cottonwood Creek, the others at South Cottonwood Creek. The two segments came together just north of the unplanned jog around Bee Tree. Moments after the volunteers had relaxed for a break, this newly completed piece of the Colorado Trail got its first customers: Ralph Gibson and his dog Bitsy, residents of nearby Rainbow Lake Resort.

Gibson had seen the trail head on Middle Cottonwood Creek and had just started walking. After four miles he came out on a county road; that's as far south as he could go on the Colorado Trail. If all had gone according to the plan laid out ten years ago, he could have started near Denver and followed the trail all the way to Durango.

That was the dream, back in 1974. Colorado was to get a 409-mile trail for foot and horse traffic, winding through the Rockies along gentle grades at relatively low elevations. Thus the hiking season would be extended, and parts of the trail would provide excellent cross-country skiing. Suitable for ambling families, it also would connect with rugged wilderness trails and the climbing routes up many of the state's 14,000-foot peaks.

The Colorado Trail was to link major tourist centers, giving them new summer packages to promote. In addition, a hut system would be developed so that hikers wouldn't have to carry tents and stoves. Colleges, from Metropolitan State in Denver to Fort Lewis in Durango, would develop educational programs based on the trail, covering natural and human history in four life zones and a rich scene that included everything from Utes to abandoned railroad beds, from mining camps and sawmill towns to glittering destination resorts.

Since all but sixty-one miles were already in place as pieces of existing routes, the entire Colorado Trail could be done by 1978 — at the latest, 1980. It was all going to happen because there was ample seed money; $100,000 donated by the Gates Foundation. Also there was the Colorado Mountain Trails Foundation, Inc., which soon had an office, a paid staff, and a well-connected board of directors.

It didn't happen. Thanks to dedicated volunteers, the Colorado Trail, ex-
cept for two pieces, is in place from near Strontia Springs Reservoir twenty miles southwest of Denver to Windy Peak, on the Continental Divide west of Poncha Pass. But that's still 160 mountainous miles from Durango, and the remainder of the route hasn't been designated.

The foundation's directors last met five years ago, and the Denver office closed before that. They still have some money in the bank, about $10,000, but no one seems to know just how much. At least one remaining director thinks the foundation should be dissolved because it has become an impediment to completing the Colorado Trail.

If the idea of the trail started with any one person, that person would be Bill Lucas. In 1973 Lucas was the regional forester for the eight-state Rocky Mountain region of the U.S. Forest Service, which manages a third of Colorado. The bulk of Colorado outdoor recreation occurs in National Forests.

Over the preceding seven years, the number of hikers had grown by 20 percent a year. Wilderness areas were being trampled, shorn of firewood and filled with fire rings. Roadside campgrounds were jammed every summer weekend. The Forest Service camground under increasing criticism for catering to the extremes of recreation — brutal wilderness treks and roadside campground amenities — without offering anything in the middle, for families who wanted to stroll through the woods without staggering under fifty-pound packs. And there was the first of several fuel shortages and gasoline price jumps. Future recreation was expected to be less dependent on gasoline, and much less dependent on federal money; there wasn't going to be as much money for the Forest Service.

With all that in mind, Lucas convened a meeting in late 1973, inviting everyone he could find who had an interest in Colorado outdoor recreation: ski area operators, wilderness outfitters, trail bikers, off-road vehicle club members, summer resort owners, conversation groups, educators, and others. Out of that evolved the Colorado Mountain Trails Foundation, which was to plan, develop, and manage the Colorado Trail.

Celia Nobles helps Colleen Jones clean up at the end of a day.
The Gates Foundation stopped supporting the trail after its first grant. 'It was conditioned on their making progress, and their progress didn't warrant further grants.'
Planning had started earlier that year. Lucas organized high school and college student volunteers, who worked their way west to the Continental Divide from Roxborough Park south of Denver. They noted avalanche-prone slopes, fragile tundra, and mountain sheep breeding grounds to avoid; they spotted likely pasturage for pack stock; they evaluated springs and creeks as water supplies; they checked for access to roads and towns, so hikers could take one-day or two-day trips as well as extended jaunts.

Once the foundation was operating, that process extended to Durango, where a group of middle-aged hikers scouted routes. Hugo Ferchau, a foundation director and professor of botany at Western State College in Gunnison, had student volunteers examining the central mountains to put together data for the required environmental assessment. Closer to Denver, the first new trail segments appeared in 1975 as about 200 members of the National Campers and Hikers Association hacked out six miles between the hamlets of South Platte and Buffalo Creek.

Since 1972, the Colorado Mountain Club has arranged for volunteers to work in the National Forests. Gudy Gaskill of Golden, the club's trails and huts chairman, puts together these outings; she also is a director of the foundation. She advertises in national outdoor magazines and attracts volunteers from all over to spend a summer week building the Colorado Trail.

Designated a Centennial-Bicentennial project in 1976, the Colorado Trail was supposed to be finished by 1978. After the first $100,000, the Gates Foundation promised $100,000 in 1977 and $106,000 in 1978, if progress on the Colorado Trail was satisfactory. Other foundations made smaller grants, ranging from $1,000 to $10,000. Dozens of volunteers were in the field every summer, and in some districts, the Forest Service was able to put its own paid crews to work on the trail.

If you had been ambitious in the summer of 1984 and decided to follow the Colorado Trail from Denver to Durango, you would have had to drive to Kassler and stroll up the abandoned grade of the Denver, South Park & Pa-

*A segment of the trail passes through a beautiful aspen forest.*
specific Railroad for six miles in Waterton Canyon until you reached Strontia Springs Dam, a recent Denver Water Board project. The Colorado Trail formally starts there with a ten-mile segment constructed in 1981 by the water board.

From there to Copper Mountain, the Colorado Trail is in place, although not all of it has signs. It follows the north border of South Park, skirting the Lost Creek Wilderness Area, and comes to Kenosha Pass, crossing U.S. Highway 285 before climbing the ridge between Michigan and Jefferson creeks to summit the Continental Divide at 11,585-foot Georgia Pass. From there down to Colorado Highway 9, which it intersects four miles north of Breckenridge, the Colorado Trail shares a route with four-wheel-drive roads. Then it continues west across the Tenmile Range to Copper Mountain.

There the Colorado Trail ends, although many old mining roads and pack trails twist through the Jacque Peak area to connect Copper Mountain to Tennessee Pass: “You can hike it now,” explained Sara Doman, a technician for the Dillon Ranger District, “but there’s no officially designated Colorado Trail. We haven’t figured out which route will be the Colorado Trail.”

After Tennessee Pass, the Colorado Trail follows the old Main Range Trail along the east flank of the Sawatch Range, highest in the Rockies, providing access to such famous fourteeners as Massive and Elbert.

About fifty miles south of Tennessee Pass, the Colorado Trail arrives at Middle Cottonwood Creek, due west of Buena Vista. The next four miles, with the jog for Bee Tree, was completed last summer.

From South Cottonwood Creek

Answer to Today’s Puzzle

Now far and away the

SOFT PACK 100s FILTER, MENTHOL: 3 mg. "tar", 0 av. per cigarette by FTC method.
Competitive tar levels reflect either the Feb. '84 FTC NOW, THE LOWEST OF ALL BRANDS

[Image of cigarette packs with tar levels]
Rebates with Corona typewriters.

The page...and cash in your pocket.

Ultrasonic 350 Messenger
$40 Rebate

Memory Correct 300 Messenger
$40 Rebate

Sterling Electronic
$10 Rebate

Citation Electronic 100
$10 Rebate

Ferchau said, "However, nobody's come up with one. As it is, you could say that the Colorado Trail is on an indefinite hold in these parts."

So is the trails foundation. "I'm not too sure how or why that happened," Ferchau said. "It just dwindled, and now it's inactive." After the first grant, Gates Foundation support ended. "It was conditioned on their making progress," said Charles Froelicher, Gates Foundation executive director. "The progress didn't warrant further grants."

Lucas, who served for a while as executive director of the trails foundation after he retired in 1976, said the inactivity was partially because "the board and one of our executive directors had big differences toward the end. When he left, we board members didn't agree on a course."

"And the foundation didn't need to serve some purposes it was designed to serve. For instance, it was going to provide tools for the volunteers, but the Forest Service agreed to provide their tools and safety gear. The foundation was going to provide insurance for the volunteers. Then the Federal Volunteer Act was passed, and that meant the volunteers were automatically covered by workmen's compensation insurance. So in a way, the foundation ran out of jobs to do."

"The foundation ought to be dissolved. It's just in the way," Gaskell said. "We who still want to get the trail finished have a hard time raising money as long as people think that that foundation is there, even though that foundation is doing nothing. But it's been hard to get the remaining directors together so that we can kill the foundation and put its money, however much there is, to work on the trail, and to raise whatever it takes to finish it."

All three said that Mayo "Butch" Sommermeyer, a Fort Collins lawyer who has
served on the foundation board since its inception, had the expertise to start dissolving the foundation. He agreed that it should be done, saying, ‘The foundation is basically inoperative and nonfunctional.’ Sommermeyer blamed the foundation’s inactivity on ‘unrealistic expectations. Everybody seemed to think the trail would get done quickly and that it would have something for everybody. When it

didn’t, people got discouraged. ‘And it was frustrating,’ he continued. ‘We had money, but it was going to administrative salaries, phone bills, and office rent, not to building the trail. It was seed money, but the plant never really blossomed. I hope somebody decides to carry it on by setting up something new to replace the foundation. I believe in the trail and I want to see it completed. But I’m tired of it.’ He

said the remaining money, about $10,000, is in an interest-bearing account in a Golden bank.

The Colorado Mountain Trails Foundation is obviously in no position to complete the Colorado Trail. Neither is the U.S. Forest Service; its budget for trail-building in the Rocky Mountain region went from $1.25 million in 1982 to $822,000 in 1985. ‘It’s more than we can do to maintain existing trails,’ said Chuck McConnell, recreation planner in the Denver regional office. ‘When it comes to new construction, our priorities are correcting safety hazards and building loop trails in high-use areas, where we get the most recreation user-days for our money.’

If there ever is a Colorado Trail, it will likely be because Gudy Gaskill hasn’t given up. In 1980, completing the Colorado Trail ranked as the first priority for her Colorado Mountain Club trails and huts committee.

That has changed, though. ‘It’s not our first priority anymore,’ she said, ‘because so many other trails need work, too. It would be selfish to put all our volunteers to work on the Colorado Trail with so much else that should be done.’

Gaskill estimated that with...
twenty-eight additional miles of new trail — the segment across the east side of Mount Princeton and some links in the San Juans — there would be a continuous trail of sorts from Kasser to Durango. "And we'll have volunteers out there working on it every summer until it is done. It's going to take a while, building only two to four miles a year."

That's why about a dozen people shared a campsite up South Cottonwood Creek during the last week of August last summer. The week earlier, another dozen volunteers had been camping there, working on that four-mile trail segment.

The preceding spring, the Mountain Club had offered a choice of eight one-week trail jobs. All were arranged by Gaskill after consulting with McConnell, who receives requests for volunteer trail work from district rangers across the state. Some were deep in the backcountry, where the volunteers had to carry in their supplies and tools. The Colorado Trail crews could drive to their campsite.

Each volunteer pays $10 to cover administrative costs. In return, the Mountain Club supplies food and some camp facilities, such as a cook tent with a propane stove and a latrine tent. Volunteers provide their own personal gear.

They arrive on a Saturday and set up camp. Sunday is a day of rest — hiking, collecting mushrooms, fishing, or examining wildflowers. Wednesday, too, is a day off, by tradition devoted to climbing a nearby 14,000-foot peak, camp is broken on Saturday. The trail gets built on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday.

At six o'clock on those mornings, a wind-up alarm clock goes off. Breakfast duties are rotated; other volunteers pack sack lunches for the noon break, up on the trail. By eight o'clock, the dishes are done and the crew is ready; a forest ranger comes by to talk about yesterday's work and today's. Then it's time to hike to work — the more they got done yesterday, the farther they have to walk in today.

Building a trail is more complicated than stomping out a path. Once the general corridor is selected, the area must be examined on foot. A specific route has to meet certain criteria: the Colorado Trail, designed to be gentle, avoids steep climbs and high elevations as much as possible, so it twists like a drunken sidewinder. It's for recreation, not for getting from one place to another in a hurry.

On this segment, Forest Service engineers first flagged the route. Then they brought in convict volunteers from the nearby Buena Vista Correctional Facility, who were glad to get outdoors and do the
The heavy work of initial trail clearing with chainsaws.
The Mountain Club volunteers go to work next. First the
sideslope is leveled—by hacking away at the hillside
with a pulaski, which looks something like a double-bitted
ax with one bit perpendicular
to the other. Then come other
volunteers, armed with pry
bars and pulaskis. They dig
and chop to remove stumps
and strain for leverage as they
pull bread-box-sized boulders
out of the trail bed.

Then the trail surface is
smoothed and packed with
meleods. Along the way, oth-
ers trim overhanging tree
limbs and protruding brush.
They want twelve feet of
overhead clearance, enough to
clear a rider on horseback, and
an arm's length of side
clearance.

Where the trail crosses
small ravines of sporadic water
flow, the volunteers arrange
rocks to build a French drain,
a trench filled with loose
stones and covered with earth.

Bigger and more constant
streams get log bridges, next
to smoothed fords for equest-
rians. Where the trail flanks
a steep hillside, it has to be sup-
ported by rock cribbing; a few
yards can take hours of back-
breaking toil. Along steeper
sections, the trail receives wa-
ter bars, drainage bumps that
divert runoff so the volun-
tees' work won't be washed
out next spring. On a good
day, the volunteers can con-
struct several hundred yards.

"You could look at it as a
screwy way to spend a vaca-
tion," said Chuck Fraser of
Lakewood, an engineer who
designs fiber-optic data trans-
mission lines for Mountain
Bell. "But a vacation is sup-
posed to be a break from your
routine, and this is sure a lot
different from thinking at a
desk." Fraser was getting a lot
of kidding for being the camp's strong man; an inch-
and-thick steel pry bar had
snapped while he was pushing
on it.

A trail workday ends some-
time between 3 and 5 P.M., de-
pending the day's accom-
plishments, thunderstorms, and the
general morale. At dinner,
cooking duties again are rotat-
ed and shared. Some gather,
saw, and split firewood; others
cook; others do dishes. Then
it's time to relax and swap sto-
ries around the campfire.

At this camp, a nightly di-
version is scanning the sky for
satellites. Jim Ray, one of the
volunteers, makes his living
tracking satellites for Hughes
Aircraft, but he can't explain
much to the others; most of his
work is classified.

No one stays up much past
ten o'clock, and most are off in
their own tents before that.
It's a harmonious camp, which
pleases Jones, one of the co-
leaders. She works in Engle-
wood for the Social Security
Administration. "This is the
first time I've led a crew, and
I'm always worried that things
won't go right."

She was supposed to have
an experienced co-leader,
Irene Cazer of Denver. But
Cazer had injured her leg the
preceding week, so her con-
tribution to this trail crew was
limited to grocery shopping
and a shipment of rhubarb pie,
baked in civilization. "Plan-
ning meals for twelve people
for a week, where you don't
have refrigeration except a

thing about camp," Nobles
said, "is that there isn't any
running water. It's so hard to
keep clean." Sh and Jones
took turns pouring buckets of
water over each other's hair
after dinner.

Although most volunteers
belong to the Colorado Moun-
tain Club, that's not a require-
ment. Over the past decade,
they've come from twenty-
two states and several foreign
countries. Everyone on this
crew had much the same rea-
son for volunteering for a
week of sprained backs and
blistered hands: I like to walk
on mountain trails. This is a
way of paying my dues for all
those great hikes. And there's
a feeling of accomplishment
that you don't get behind a
desk. You can see right away
that you've done something.

Most planned to be back
next summer, spending a
week of vacation swinging a
pulaski. "Sure it's hard work,
but it's a lot of fun, too," Jones
said. "You get to meet great
people. And we're going to
get this trail built."